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Freedom Quilt: Collective Patchwork in Post-Communist Hungary

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This series of events began with a concerted intention to highlight the exceptional talent of artists living Hungary while using a textile as a tool to reflect collective memory. To contextualize this effort, I begin with an overview of events there in 1989; the Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union collapsed, and its satellite states--one of which was Hungary--regained independence. As a result of these political changes, many countries in the East European block experienced a lifted ban on social gatherings that were critical of the political climate, and in Hungary, the Hungarian Patchwork Guild (hereafter referred to as HPG) formed through a government-issued grant.¹ Thirty years later, in 2019, and with a US State Department grant designated for creative projects celebrating the 30th anniversary of the liberation, I designed and facilitated a framework of public engagement events. In collaboration with Moholy-Nagy Művészeti Egyetem (hereafter referred to as MOME) students, the HPG, the United States Embassy in Budapest, and members of the public that were local to Hungary. The intention was to investigate a present-day relationship to democracy and freedom in Hungary's developing Capitalist economic system by opening space for uncensored conversation around individual lived experience and responses to the current political climate.

The project developed out of nine months of research, while on a Fulbright, in which I examined the evolution of kékfestő fabric in the region.² I sought to understand how the country's history of alternating political regimes and border changes affected the material's production and role in the broader economy. I focused on two periods of change within textile production: the industrial revolution of the early nineteenth century as it relates to Imperialism, and the 1949 Soviet-led industrialization, as it relates to nationalism.³ This process came to Central Europe from India or Japan.⁴ Its steps include printing resist dye paste onto cotton with copper inlaid woodblocks, submersion dyeing the printed material in indigo vats, and finally removing the resist agent to reveal repeat patterns on blue or black cloth.⁵

¹ "Történetünk [Our Story]," Magyar Foltvarró Céh [Hungarian Patchwork Guild], Hungarian Patchwork Guild, January 22, 2021, www.foltvarro.hu/tortenetunk.

² "Blaudruck/Modrotisk/Kékfestés/Modrotlač, Resist Block Printing and Indigo Dyeing in Europe," UNESCO, UNESCO World Heritage, 2018, <http://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/blaudruck-modrotisk-kekfestes-modrotlac-resist-block-printing-and-indigo-dyeing-in-europe-01365>. This resist block print and indigo dye surface design technique is a UNESCO World Heritage site in five Central European countries.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*. Edited by Terence Ranger. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁴ Ottó Domonkos, Sarodi Tibor, and Ecker Károliné, *Indigo Dyeing in Hungary* (Budapest: Textile Museum Foundation, 2007).

⁵ Diana Orosz, Art Historian, Museologist and Curator at the Goldberger Textilipari Gyűjtemény, in conversation with the author, December 2018.



Pattern sample book from Győri Kékfestő Műhely archive in Győr. Image courtesy of the author.

Through studio visits with three of the six remaining Hungarian kékfestő producers in Győr, Tiszakécske, and Nagynyárád, it became clear that the 400-year-old tradition experienced fluctuating levels of creative freedom and oppression imposed by different governments. As Hungarians continually reckon their national identity following multiple occupations and border changes, the many ethnicities in and around the country have used it to exhibit their heritage through displays of folk art and national dress.⁶ This line of inquiry was followed back 180 years to an example of its use in protest and labor histories that contextualizes the *Freedom Quilt*, which is primarily made up of the material.

In 1841, Hungarian noblewomen wore garments made with the kékfestő cloth, displaying a government-issued pattern depicting the word “HONI,” which translated to “just one” in Hungarian at that time.⁷ This was understood by the public as an act of protest against Hungary’s impending reliance on Austrian textile producers as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was about to form under the Habsburg Monarchy. As the fabric production grew within the broader textile industry a century later, hundreds of family-run dye houses formed and the material became a

⁶ Linda Dégh, “Uses of Folklore as Expressions of Identity by Hungarians in the Old and New Country,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 21, no. 2/3 (1984): 187–200, www.jstor.org/stable/3814557.

⁷ Diana Orosz, Art Historian, Museologist and Curator at the Goldberger Textilipari Gyűjtemény, in conversation with the author, December 2018.

lucrative export until the Soviet occupation. Most dye houses were then shut down or became property of the state, and on occasion forced to dye uniforms for factory workers and manual laborers.⁸ In the present day, this decorative blue and white patterned material is easy to spot in folk dress and souvenirs for tourists; additionally, the Budapest city Parking Inspectors and public transport system employee uniforms remain in this iconic blue color; a contemporary symbol of governmental power intersecting with craft.



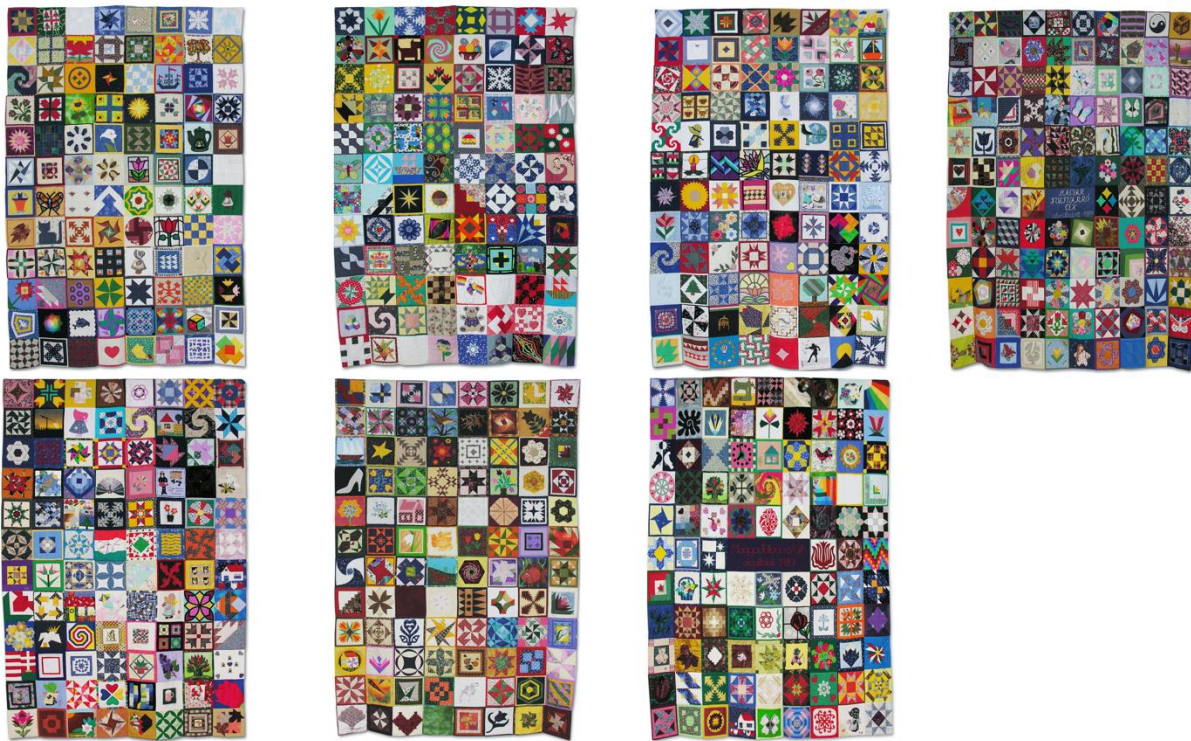
*Pattern block and print sample of government-issued protest pattern on display at the Goldberger Museum in Obuda, Hungary.
Image courtesy of the author.*

In Hungary today, quilt practitioners often use *kékfestő* as a base fabric for their technically impressive works, linking this enduring aspect of folk heritage with contemporary quilting. I partnered with the Hungarian Patchwork Guild because of its initiatives of free education, community building, and an unlikely link to United States quilting traditions that is evident in the organization's formation. The American-based International Quilt Association opened an exhibition in Salzburg Germany in 1988 that influenced the foundation of patchwork guilds across Europe. After participating, Anna Dolanyi and Sarolta Czaka began a patchwork movement in Hungary by inviting 1,300 quilters from 27 countries to send album quilt blocks that toured the country as completed quilts, thus teaching people about the practice and ultimately forming the guild. This quilt was later auctioned to benefit the Hospice Foundation of

⁸ Győri Műhely in conversation with the author in July 2019.

Ms. Dolanyi's hometown in Debrecen, solidifying the group's dedication to charity work that can be seen in recent projects such as quilt-making for flood survivors and quilted pillows for breast cancer patients.

In this instance, the term 'guild' is utilized in a manner that refers to "characters and values neglected by our modern world such as solidarity, quality and community that is open for all," creating a social space of inclusion through national and international exhibition opportunities.⁹ When someone joins, they sew a quilt block that gets added to the "Guild Letter" quilt, representing their entire membership at national events. This 500 all-female member organization (with the exception of two men at this moment) acts as an umbrella under which there are 60 groups in eight regions of the country, each functioning as an independent unit.



The Hungarian Patchwork Guild Letter quilt representing total membership as of October 2020. Image courtesy of the HPG.

Although there is a nominal membership fee--equivalent to either \$20 or \$25 USD based on an individual's income--participation in most events is free of charge and an abundance of technical information can be gleaned from online forums, a printed quarterly newsletter, and social media outlets. This organizational structure thus subverts current methodologies of late-stage capitalist education systems by sharing information with minimal monetary exchange.

⁹ "Hungarian Patchwork Guild," Magyar Foltvarró Céh [Hungarian Patchwork Guild], January 18, 2021, <https://www.foltvarro.hu/>. As stated in the HPG mission statement.

Through witnessing a series of large public protests in December of 2018, my attention shifted to new labor laws proposed by Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán and later approved by the Hungarian Parliament. At the center of the outcry was the newly signed and commonly referred to ‘slave law’ by protesters, that allowed foreign corporations to demand up to 400 hours of overtime a year from employees and delay compensation for it for up to three years.¹⁰ Additionally, the state media organization Médiaszolgáltatás-támogató és Vagyonkezelő Alap (MTVA) that dictates what is viewable on local television did not cover the protests. This prevented many members of the public from knowing the reasons for and scale of these protests, prompting accusations of free speech censorship.¹¹



Hungarians protest newly signed labor laws at the capitol Parliament Building, December 2018.¹²

Textile students in my MOME *Fast/Slow* graduate course, developed in tandem with the research, expressed that in addition to this example of media censorship, critical analysis in

¹⁰"2012. évi I. törvény a munka törvénykönyvéről [Act I of 2012 on the Labor Code]," Wolters Kluwer, accessed January 2021, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1200001.tv&fbclid=IwAR2cMBQSOYkumwyKyQvre3l5z7bjr6m0QFbKOLT5W0SPGBSas4XUN4N995Y>.

¹¹Patrick Kingsley, "Outside Hungary's State Television: A Protest. On Air: Pigeon Talk," The New York Times, The New York Times, December 18, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/world/europe/hungary-protest-orban.html.

¹²"Fresh Hungary 'Slave Law' Protests in Budapest," BBC News, BBC, December 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46651428>.

creative sectors was being dismantled by the current administration. According to Markéta Jonášová, this began by removing funding from art establishments that exhibit liberal or critical works. The government-sponsored Hungarian Academy of Arts offers official sponsorship to its member artists that decide to make their affiliation with the Fidesz party public. Those that choose not to join are left a narrow margin and few spaces to work within. Jonášová states,

Artists and professionals who refuse to toe the line or work within the status quo can not rely on the support from the state-run institutions and are left at the mercy of the art market and private sponsors.¹³

At stake is a deeply honest conflict for the young women: to stay in a country with a government that does not support their emerging art practices or leave home? Conversations focused on censorship and the ability for folk art to endure due to its decorative and seemingly non-critical nature. As we attended the protests, we collectively questioned the potential of the mass gathering. We parsed apart the ways in which a textile could operate as a tool for communication in this political climate which was reflected in their final projects and ultimately inspired the *Freedom Quilt*.



Students final projects from authors FAST/SLOW graduate seminar SP'19 at Moholy-Nagy Művészeti Egyetem.

¹³ Markéta Jonášová, "Hungarian Art in the Age of Viktor Orbán," Artportal, June 11, 2019, artportal.hu/magazin/hungarian-art-in-the-age-of-viktor-orban.

Following my Fulbright research, I presented a call for participation at the HPG Annual Conference in May 2019, asking members to create 40 by 40 centimeters quilt blocks using a majority of kékfestő cloth with the hopes that enough would be generated to make a quilt. My call quickly circulated through their well-connected community, resulting in approximately 90 blocks arriving in my mailbox by mid-summer of that year. As an attempt to imagine the work's outcome, I laid the blocks out in continually changing arrangements, beginning to recognize many of the piecing and appliqué patterns from the Amish quilting tradition in my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I was able to identify the kékfestő prints used, some of which were printed many years ago, as associated with specific family-run dye houses that I had visited, creating another layer of pattern specificity that is related to geographical location.

I then held a series of eight quilt block making workshops free of charge at the United States Embassy American Corners locations in Debrecen, Veszprém, Budapest, Szeged, at the Ördöghatán Festival in Pécs as well as the Brody House Studios and on the MOME campus; all locations where English is spoken or a translator was accessible. The practice of album quilting, in which contributed blocks from individuals are combined into one quilt, can be found at points in the practice's history but it was unusual for guild members to be given no pattern restriction, beyond my request of using kékfestő cloth. The only exception being the Guild Letter Quilt which functions as a visual symbol for the union of its members.

To foster cultural exchange and inspire block designs, I lectured on US protest histories and the role quilts played in both war and recording minority culture identity. Examples in which quilt patterns functioned as a symbol of freedom were highlighted, such as the commemorative Revolutionary War Battle of Burgoyne pattern that visually depicts American soldiers closing in on British troops to win the war.¹⁴ Also considered were Civil War Cot Quilts used for sleep and burial, as well as the oral accounts passed down through African American families of pattern-coded quilts that guided slaves to free territories on the Underground Railroad.¹⁵

I gave basic sewing and applique instruction so that participants could create a block based on the prompt “What does freedom mean to you?” and presented examples of textiles that were present in a historical moment of shifting power structures: the ephemeral object of a quilt pointing to perforations in someone’s life. Women came from all corners of Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Croatia to attend the workshops. They were designed and advertised to inexperienced sewers, drawing a diverse crowd of students, artists and activists; additionally, HPG members always showed up in large groups despite having already submitted quilt blocks through the post. They came in groups of friends, mother/daughter pairs, and small guild groups consistently early and eager to meet an American so interested in their community.

¹⁴ “World Quilts: World Quilts Offers a Global Perspective on Quiltmaking,” International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <https://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org>.

¹⁵ Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: a Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).



Block on the left translates to both 'are you free' (maker unknown) and 'you are free'. Block on the right by HPG member Lövey Ágnes commemorating Hungary joining the European Union in 2004. Image courtesy of the author.

The youngest workshop participant was aged four, the oldest 93; therefore, some have had the experience of living through both of the recent political regimes. The women in attendance were reluctant to speak about politics in the context of group events; it was only in private that they expressed political positions and reflections on the past. Many older women expressed in one-on-one conversations a nostalgia for the Soviet era because clearly defined work schedules provided more time for family, creative practices, and self-care. Now they rely on the community built by the Guild as a support system to open up time and space for quilting. Of note on this topic, a small group from Szeged brought me to their town community center to continue a workshop conversation and see their work. When asked how so many quilts had accumulated, they stated a preference of gifting their work to people as a gesture of love instead of selling which would involve entering an economic system that was not important to their motivations for quilt-making.

Following the series of workshops, the 256 blocks were stitched together during a four-day quilting bee event at the Skanzen Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum. This event was introduced within the historical context of African American Freedom quilting bees in which women gathered to topstitch an individual's quilt top together to speed the process and raise awareness of political issues.¹⁶ This collective and fundamentally democratic meeting space for slow handwork inherently leads to the sharing of skills, news, and practical information in a social manner, which was experienced by our group through continual conversation and exchange with the onlooking public.

¹⁶ Floris Barnett Cash. "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 1 (1995): 30–41, doi:10.2307/2717705.



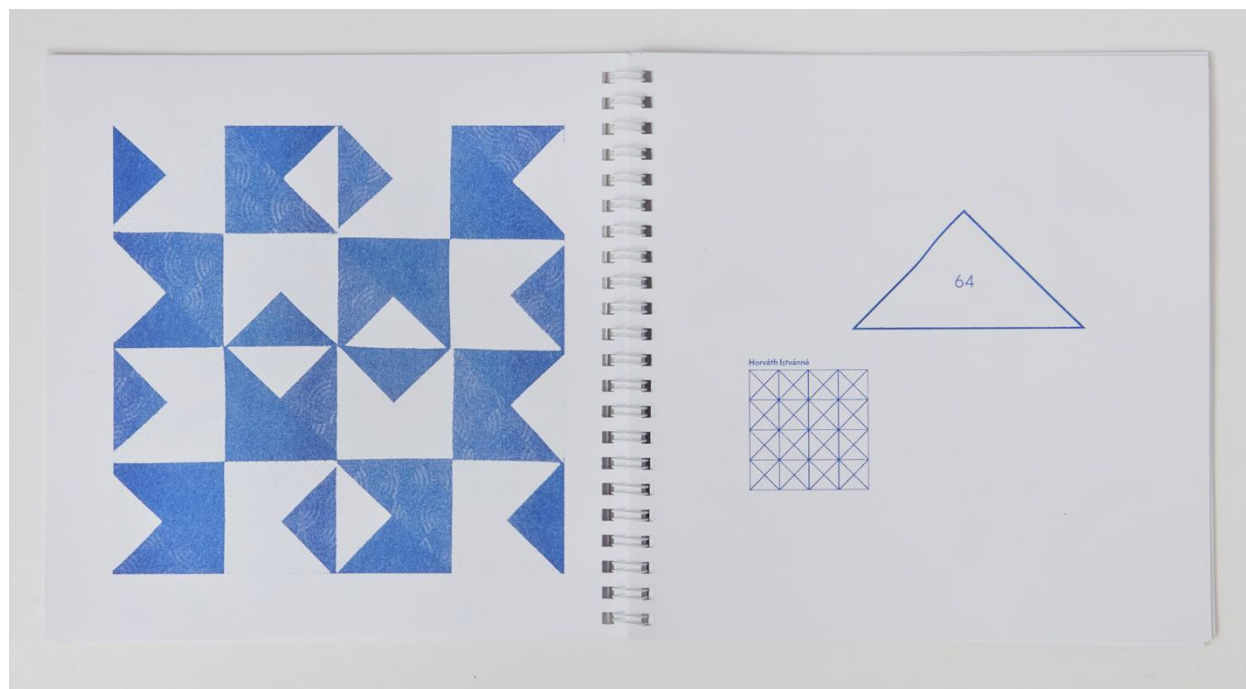
Hungarian Patchwork Guild members constructing the Freedom Quilt at the Skanzen Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum in Szentendre, Hungary, August 16–19, 2019. Image courtesy of András Ladócsi.

Through a majority vote process, the group decided what blocks to include, their arrangement, and whether to top-stitch by hand or machine. The objective was to give each person donating their time and skill an equal amount of ownership over the outcome by distributing the power of choice evenly. With each new step, we paused for a conversation and vote; a natural expert on the task at hand would emerge to teach the group. Festival attendees looked on and sometimes became involved in the lively debate and conversations.

Through this event, a conceptual thread between the daily lives of the participants and patchwork could be traced to the etymological root of ‘bee’, which means service, prayer, and helping a neighbor. Within each combination of women, I witnessed deep respect between them, based on a shared love of quilting and the many years they spent watching one another’s lives evolve. When guild president Ildiko Polyak’s husband arrived with pastries one morning, all the women greeted him in a familial manner and he stayed until the end, helping me to pack up. It was through these personal exchanges and sense of community that the quilt was constructed.

To conclude the project, the next events were designed to circulate the outcome in both Hungarian and American art and craft communities. An edition of 100 risograph books was

printed and first released at RisoPlant Budapest in January 2020. Designed by Ryan Ingebritson, the artifact was conceptualized to document the process and people that contributed to the project while providing a way to circulate the ideas generated from the group conversations. It doubles as a catalog, with an essay written by myself, and functional pattern instruction for quilters to make twelve of the blocks contributed to the quilt by HPG members. The book's design is based on the many levels of process in quilt making, aiming to reduce the complexities of this highly structured practice to simple visual forms in order to highlight the moments in that process that personal choice makes the final product distinct to its maker.



Freedom Quilt Hungary Pattern Book. Dimensions 7.5" x 7.5". Image courtesy of Andrew Rafacz Gallery.

Upon returning to the USA, the quilt and book were exhibited at Andrew Rafacz Gallery in Chicago in February 2020. During the international COVID-19 lockdown, a free digital download of the book was released in the spirit of the Hungarian quilters' preference for gifting.¹⁷ It continues to be downloaded from people around the world and images of remade blocks are circulated on the project's social media outlets.¹⁸ Additionally, this project continues through my ongoing conversation with the HPG. I published a series of four essays about American quilting patterns in their quarterly guild newsletters. This request was made as a follow up to my workshop lectures because of their short (30-year) history with patchwork and desire to learn about the cultural sources of patterns.

¹⁷ Christalena Hughmanick, "Freedom Quilt Pattern Book Download," March 13, 2020, www.christalenaughmanick.com/shop/freedom-quilt-hungary-book-download.

¹⁸ Instagram: @freedom_quilt_hungary, https://www.instagram.com/freedom_quilt_hungary/



The completed Freedom Quilt Hungary. Dimensions 11' x 15'. Image courtesy of Andrew Rafacz Gallery.

In conclusion, the *Freedom Quilt Hungary* project was motivated by the possibility of an object--a quilt--to function as a tool for both individual and collective expression. In a review of the project, art critic Lori Waxman states,

Two-thousand-nineteen was also the 30th anniversary of the end of socialist rule in the country, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the guild, and the electoral setback of populist dictator Viktor Orbán. In the end it's all connected—freedom of expression, freedom to congregate, political freedom, aesthetic and human diversity—just as the 108 unique blocks in Hughmanick's “Freedom Quilt” have been stitched together with care to make a single enormous, strong and utterly vibrant textile. Would that our

basest politicians—American, Hungarian and otherwise—would stop trying to unpick it, and our populaces could work together to halt them.¹⁹

The defining goal of consciously opening a complicated conversation around politics and identity was met with a level of receptivity that could not have been anticipated at the outset of this endeavor. The contributed imagery from guild members represented traditional aesthetics with an expression of identity most evident in private conversations carried out through the events. In a broader context, the object now functions as a symbol for collective action, cultural exchange, and persistence of the quilting practice.

¹⁹Lori Waxman, “COVID Reviews: Christalena Hughmanick, Cassie Tompkins, Selina Trepp, Tin Wai Wong, Brandon Sward, Perennial Space,” *The Quarantine Times*, *The Quarantine Times*, 24 July 2020, quarantinetimes.org/news/39n8m6s9azf4qddl5qzvh7d2rmsl38.

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